

SAVE THE DICKINSON HISTORIC DISTRICT!

Article # 56



Henry Francis Hills Mansion, 1863

By LOUIS S. GREENBAUM

GUEST COLUMN

Not since Amherst Town Meeting in 1993 voted to restore rather than demolish our beautiful Richardson-style Town Hall (1889) has a question of historical preservation arisen of such urgency to our entire community. Article 36 of the Town Meeting warrant proposes a change of zoning of two frontage lots on Main Street within the Dickinson Historical District from residential to commercial. These two lots are part of a 2.8 acre plot on which Henry Francis Hills (1833-1896) erected his imposing mansion built by William Fenno Pratt in 1863. Several years ago an Amherst developer bought the mansion and land and then divided the tract into six lots — five frontage lots (three on Gray Street and two on Main) and one homestead lot.

Hills family members were the richest, most influential and public-spirited citizens of Amherst.

From their front porch they looked south over capacious lawns to their factories across the street, which gave employment to thousands of workers, and brought the Industrial Revolution to Amherst. Alongside was the railroad which they also brought to town and next door was the First National Bank also founded by the Hills'. The family donated substantially to bring

the newly founded Massachusetts Agricultural College to Amherst, and it financed significant projects of community improvement. It would be hard to identify any house in Amherst more linked to the history of our town.

Three historical houses have been moved and restored on three lots on the eastern side of the property (Gray Street). They were well sited and do not detract substantially from the mansion and surrounding land which retains its commanding sweep of open space with a view of the Notch. Town Meeting voted in 2008 to save the two lots on Main Street as urban open space by offering the current owner, Jerry Guidera, the state-mandated appraised value of the lots, which he rejected. The Hills mansion and a companion mansion to the west built by Pratt for his father in 1864 (The Women's Club) rank with the Dickinson houses for their design and historical importance.

These lots should not be rezoned for business not only because such use is incompatible with the district's unity of domestic habitation and is "unharmonious with the aesthetic and historic values of the district." Once rezoned there is no guarantee what business would occupy the site now and in the future. The presence of

considerable parking and traffic would detract significantly from the striking streetscape, landscaped grounds and two mansions as well as the historic houses on Gray Street. The request is being made so Amherst Media can move its headquarters there from College Street. However incompatible that is to a historic district, there is no assurance that it will be built.

Nor would Guidera be adversely affected financially by retaining the current residential zoning. He has already presented plans to the Historical Commission for residential construction whose design would conform to the prevailing neo-classical architecture in place and would be subject to approval by the newly formed Historic District Commission. Guidera's future plans to convert the mansion into condos might present a further set of changes.

Once again Town Meeting is being called upon to render judgment about what is in the best long-term interest of the community. The Dickinson Historic District is at a crucial crossroad.

It is a priceless legacy that should continue to inspire, instruct and accord delight to future generations. It is our heritage. It is who we are as a town. It is our civic responsibility to preserve it.

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